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Sen. Baker to the rescue

Congressional oversight of intelligence full of leaks

Rising above partisanship in this election year, Howard H. Baker Jr., the retiring Senate majority leader, dared last week to tell his surprised colleagues that the emperor wears no clothes.

For the first time, a responsible leader of the Congress has admitted publicly that the elaborate machinery designed to ensure congressional oversight of American intelligence operations is not working.

Established in the wake of Watergate as watchdogs of the public interest, the separate Senate and House Intelligence Committees were supposed to prevent any abuse of secret power by the CIA or other intelligence agencies. Initially,

both committees acted in a bipartisan way to fulfill their essential oversight functions.

But, testifying before a committee on Senate reorganization, Sen. Baker now has said out loud what many think. Warning that "We have a real problem on our hands with the intelligence committees," the Senate leader charges the two committees have become so overstuffed and so insecure that they ought to be abolished and replaced by a single joint committee modeled on the old Joint Committee on Atomic Energy.

There is a strong case for this kind of radical surgery to make congressional oversight responsible. In the last two years, the growing partisan divisions over U.S. policy toward Central America have so polarized the intelligence committees that a series of destructive leaks to the press

appear to have come from within their ranks.

The damage done to U.S. interests and allies by these unauthorized revelations is hard to measure, but it is very substantial. The Pakistan government, for example, has been subjected to harsh pressure from the Soviets as the result of a congressional leak regarding

increased American aid to the Afghan guerrillas. Then there is the hidden damage that accumulates from the hardening resolve of friends and allies not to give the U.S. access to secrets they hope to protect.

Mr. Baker only politely hints at the extent of the problem when he refers in his testimony to "leaks and press accounts of matters that are sensitive enough to warrant greater discretion." A White House official put it more directly when he described the briefing of the committees on sensitive matters as "a theater of the absurd." A top intelligence officer bitterly remarked, "Every time we go up to the Hill there are leaks. We are running a government of anarchy."

There is no single sovereign cure for this compromise of intelligence secrets in the corridors of the Capitol, but Mr. Baker's proposed solution comes as close as possible to reconciling the need for congressional oversight with the necessity for better security. Former intelligence chiefs Richard Helms, James Schlesinger, and Bobby Inman all agree that a stripped-down joint committee with a much-reduced staff provides the only practical way of rebuilding disciplined, bipartisan oversight.

The first obvious advantage of a single joint committee is that it improves security by cutting drastically the combined membership of senators and representatives and the total number of staffers. In fact, Mr. Baker calls for only eight members at most but insists they be chosen from the ablest people in both parties and be required to give overriding priority to their work on the joint committee.

Intelligence professionals are pleased with the prospect of being able to deal with a single disci-

plined committee instead of having to give repetitive testimony to two groups and they look forward to having a single responsible focal point to deal with in times of crisis. Moreover, once assured of the security of the new arrangements, the intelligence chiefs will be able to be more forthcoming in their briefings, rather than being inhibited by constant fear of leaks, as they are now.

However desirable and necessary this reform in the structure of congressional oversight may be, it is not going to be easy to accomplish. The existing organization has a bureaucratic momentum of its own, and staffers will not welcome a merger that will cost many of them their jobs.

But Rep. Henry J. Hyde, R-Ill., who serves on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, has taken the lead in drafting detailed legislation to follow up on Mr. Baker's proposal, in the hope of building enough support to ensure favorable action when the new Congress convenes next January. Already two Democrats on the Senate Intelligence Committee, Joseph Biden, D-Del., and Sam Nunn, D-Ga., have indicated a favorable interest, and a reluctant House Democratic leadership may be willing to go along after the election.

The time has come for a single joint committee on intelligence because there seems to be no better way of reconciling security with accountability in a dangerous world.

Cord Meyer is a nationally syndicated columnist.